

## SELF-REVELATION IN *THE SCARLET LETTER*

by J. A. Ward

Though Hawthorne is well known for his reticence and reserve, it is also widely recognized that he tended to think of his fiction as a means of forming contact with his audience. In his preface to the third edition of *Twice-Told Tales*, he states that his sketches "are not the talk of a secluded man with his own mind and heart . . . , but his attempts . . . to open an intercourse with the world." In his preface to *The Scarlet Letter*, the personal essay called "The Custom House," he both indulges in "an autobiographical impulse" and at the same time insists that he will "keep the inmost Me behind its veil." What he gives us, in effect, is something like the ambivalent effort at self-revelation that so perturbs Dimmesdale throughout the novel: a public confession—through the artist's writings and the minister's sermons—and yet the withholding of the essential self.

Actually Hawthorne gives away a good bit about himself—his feelings about his ancestry, his native town, and his work, his sense of failure and non-existence, his guilt over his career as author, and so forth—and yet he very insistently points out that his main purpose in the confessional essay is rather official and somewhat ceremonious:

It will be seen likewise, that this Custom House sketch has a certain propriety, of a kind always recognized in literature, as explaining how a large portion of the following pages came into my possession, and as offering proofs of the authenticity of a narrative therein contained. This, in fact,—a desire to put myself in my true position as editor, or very little more, of the most prolix of tales that make up my volume,—this, and no other is my true reason for assuming a personal relation with the public.

The explicit justification seems excessively defensive: as though Hawthorne had to excuse his extensive self-revelation by giving to it an official and impersonal literary sanction. Hence the private act is made into a public one, and the apparent intimate nature of the author's "personal relation" with the public is shown to be, after all, a mere submission to convention.

Virtually everything that follows, both in the preface and in *The Scarlet Letter*, continues to give us instances of people who fail to recognize or act upon impulses toward intimacy. Thus in "The Custom House" Hawthorne is drawn toward his native village of Salem, and yet is most uncomfortable with the feeling of attachment. "This old town of Salem—my native place

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...—possesses, or did possess, a hold on my affections, the force of which I have never realized during my season of actual residence there.” With customary restraint, Hawthorne further emphasizes his deep attachment: “though invariably happiest elsewhere, there is within me a feeling for old Salem, which, in lack of a better phrase, I must be content to call affection.” Since it is so drab and dilapidated, Hawthorne can conclude only that the reason for his affection for the place is “a sort of home-feeling with the past”—notably with his own ancestry. The ancestors, of course, are represented most unfavorably by Hawthorne, as monsters of bigotry and persecution; and indeed the author assumes that his only possible relation with them is as the recipient of the curse that the family would rightly have incurred.

Briefly to summarize, the first few pages of “The Custom House” give us a picture of the author describing three attempts on his part to indulge in what he calls “an impulse” and an “affection”: to reveal himself to his readers, to form an attachment with his native town, and to acknowledge his link to his ancestors. In each case there is a strong sense of discomfort; Hawthorne emphasizes both the unpleasantness and the dutifulness of the three indulgences. Actually Hawthorne finds his own return to Salem and meditation on his ancestors a kind of perversion that he would stifle in his own children.

One might invoke de Tocqueville as a gloss on this section of “The Custom House.” Clearly Hawthorne fills the characteristically American role of the free man troubled by the isolation made inevitable by his liberation from the bonds of society, family, and religion. But Hawthorne is interested in the psychological rather than the sociological dimensions of his loneliness. Furthermore, what heightens the narrator’s sense of isolation is the explicit unreality of those with whom he actually associates in the Custom House. Their overwhelming materiality and physicality make them totally alien to the narrator (a person most at home with the insubstantial and the imaginative). On the other hand, Hawthorne suspects that the kind of life to be found in the Custom House is not in itself deficient in reality. “The fault was mine. The page of life that was spread out before me seemed dull and commonplace, only because I had not fathomed its deeper import.” He feels that the decaying old men who lounge about the house have no sense of his own identity. To them Hawthorne is completely a “man of affairs”; to himself he is a “man of thought.” I shall return to the important idea that Hawthorne here introduces: that a public function suppresses the private self.

Significantly the kinds of activity that engage Hawthorne all involve some type of communication, albeit usually unsatisfactory and abortive. He is most concerned with the fear that no one knows of his own existence, and gains a kind of sardonic pleasure from his awareness of his name stenciled

on the various materials that pass through the Custom House. With an expression of despair somewhat muted by whimsy, Hawthorne speaks of both kinds of communication which have engaged him as finally futile and empty. That is, the purely public kind of self-advertisement that his job permits him is a kind of parody of expression that to Hawthorne can be seen only as an embarrassment. As an author he deserves to be thought "an idler"; as an intellectual he takes little pride in being "a man who had known Alcott."

It is a good lesson—though it may often be a hard one—for a man who has dreamed of literary fame, and of making for himself a rank among the world's dignitaries by such means, to step aside out of the narrow circle in which his claims are recognized, and to find how utterly devoid of significance, beyond the circle, is all that he achieves, and all he aims at.

On the other hand, literary creation at its best requires a real involvement of the artist in the human community. In his famous tableau-like parable in "The Custom House" describing the operation of the artist's imagination, Hawthorne speaks of the moonlight which invests the familiar with a quality of strangeness as "a medium the most suitable for a romance writer to get acquainted with his illusive guests." Also required is the firelight, which "mingles with the cold spirituality of moonbeams, and communicates, as it were, a heart and sensibility of human tenderness to the forms which fancy summons up." The imagination thus requires the activity of the sympathetic faculty. Also the experience of art opens the soul of the artist to the knowledge of human tenderness. The imagination of the reader also responds in such a sympathetic way to the work of art; at least this is the implication of Hawthorne's remarks about his own sense of empathic involvement in the manuscript relating the story of the scarlet letter. It is, he says, one of many manuscripts stored in the Custom House attic that "are filled not with the dullness of official formalities, but with the thought of inventive brains and the rich effusions of deep hearts." These documents embody the same fusion of intellect and heart that elsewhere in the preface are contained in the emblems of the moonlight and the firelight. Art is a way of achieving "intimacy" with both the partly discovered and partly imagined characters and the universal human heart. Yet it requires the artist's isolation and detachment. Only through quitting the "habits of companionship with individuals unlike myself"—his fellow officials in the Custom House—can Hawthorne bring life to the story of the scarlet letter. He relates the failure of his artistic imagination to respond to his subject: "So little adapted is the atmosphere of a Custom House to the delicate harvest of fancy and sensibility, that, had I remained there through ten Presidencies yet to come, I doubt whether the tale of 'The Scarlet Letter' would ever have been brought before the public eye. My imagination was a tarnished mirror." Finally Hawthorne views his departure from office as a "suicide," in which his

"figurative" public self will be "murdered" so that his private self may return to the life of authorship.

There is a temptation to regard the Custom House as a kind of symbol of the self: Hawthorne's self. We know that there is a tradition for such a symbolic equation in American literature (Roderick Usher's house, Thoreau's cabin), and that Hawthorne's works are especially full of such identifications. Not even *The House of the Seven Gables* more insistently and variously identifies people with their dwellings than *The Scarlet Letter* (e.g., Hester's remote cabin, Dimmesdale's study, the governor's mansion). These comments are appropriate to a consideration of the Custom House mainly because there is such an emphatic distinction made between the public and the concealed parts of the house: the open first story and the closed second story. The kind of writing associated with the ground floor is that of the clerk, whose "worthless scratchings of the pen" keep up the "official formalities" that are the records. In the recesses of the upper story, however, the imagination may respond to a very different kind of communication. The scarlet letter itself is the most intense kind of stimulus to the narrator's imagination: "it strangely interested me. My eyes fastened themselves upon the old scarlet letter, and would not be turned aside. Certainly there was some deep meaning in it, most worthy of interpretation, and which, as it were, streamed forth from the mystic symbol, subtly communicating itself to my sensibilities, but evading the analysis of my mind." The activity of art engages the inner self; thereby one also gains awareness of the interior of others. So the awakened imagination gives the artist a sense of his place in the human community; and yet such imaginative reverie is by definition an extremely private affair. In sum, the artist's activity both stimulates an affection for humanity and isolates from a literal engagement with mankind.

*The Scarlet Letter* may be regarded as a contrasting extension of the various public-private antitheses dealt with in the preface, though the novel is considerably less ambiguous in dramatizing the necessity of full revelation to the world. Hester reminds us of the author in certain essential ways. Indeed, her relation to the public might be interpreted as a surrealistically exaggerated version of Hawthorne's sense of shame in exposing his life and feelings before his audience. It is appropriate that the experience of Hester be taken as a serious rendering of what is nearly trivial in the preface, for Hawthorne makes explicit in the novel that New England antiquity is a heroic age, far exceeding in grandeur and meaning the drab, prosaic present of the nineteenth century. The present state of Salem is one of Hawthorne's most obvious ways of placing the earlier age in bold relief: if intolerant, the Puritans at least took life as a serious drama. Thus Hester's tragic life provides a heroic parallel to the embarrassed anxiety of the author. The Custom House essay is itself the narrator's scaffold: the place wherein the self-conscious artist, somewhat ashamed of his career in the presence of both

his fellow habitués of the Custom House and his morally vigilant ancestors, offers himself for public exposure. Like Hester, the narrator insists that he has been forced "to assume a personal relation with the public," though in his case the pressure has been imposed by literary convention.

It is basic to the moral and emotional logic of the story that the kind of public exposure that the Puritan community requires of Hester is actually essential for her well-being. Hester is at least spared the agonies of the self-repressed Dimmesdale. Her shame and humiliation, though painful, are necessary; they enforce a consistency of inner reality and public appearance. Furthermore, it is her isolation following her banishment from the community that is psychologically damaging, not the exposure on the scaffold. Like Hester, the narrator can interpret his self-revelation to the public only as a kind of punishment. Explicitly it is a punishment for his art, and, of course, in both the imagery in which he describes the artistic activity and the kind of emphasis which he customarily gives to it, Hawthorne is centrally in the Puritan tradition of associating artistic expression and sexual passion. Thus Hawthorne uses the scarlet letter as a symbol both of Hester's passionate nature and of her artistic expressiveness; both are finally one.

She had in her nature a rich, voluptuous, Oriental characteristic,—a taste for the gorgeously beautiful, which, save in the exquisite productions of her needle found nothing else, in all the possibilities of her life, to exercise itself upon. Women derive a pleasure, incomprehensible to the other sex, from the delicate toil of the needle. To Hester Prynne it might have been a mode of expressing, and therefore soothing, the passion of her life. Like all other joys, she rejected it as a sin.

Conversely art, Hester's as well as Hawthorne's, is strangely associated with sexuality: as self-expression, as a mode of creation, as intimate knowledge of others, as pleasure for the self and a means of giving pleasure to others, as an illicit practice, and as a source of guilt.

I am not primarily concerned with the way in which the Custom House essay relates thematically to *The Scarlet Letter*, but with the manifold ways in which the entire volume focuses on the problem of the revelation of the self to others. The central concern of the novel is Dimmesdale's inability to confess his part in the adultery. Dimmesdale's struggle provides the essential structure of the self-revelation process that engages the other principals as well. Essentially, that is, he demonstrates what seems to Hawthorne the psychological (and perhaps moral) necessity of openness on three closely related but basically distinct planes of being: to the self, so that one has full self-awareness; to one's most intimate relations; and to the community as a whole, usually conceived as a formal civic body. Whereas Dimmesdale's fault is concealment of his past from the community, Hester is unwilling to confide to Pearl the true significance of her scarlet letter and the identity of the child's father; finally, Chillingworth has effectively obliterated his own identity and become a leech on Dimmesdale.

Examination of the table of contents reveals that Hawthorne almost systematically alternates these three planes of being. Actually the chapters—or, in some cases, portions of chapters or clusters of chapters—tend to be of three distinct kinds: occasions of introspection or analyses of “the interior of a heart” of a character in isolation; occasions of conversation between two characters, which usually take the form of “inquisitions” or probings to locate secrets; and public occasions, wherein characters are seen in relation to the community, usually in a formal assemblage.

The first three chapters present Hester in relation to the entire village as she stands exposed on the scaffold. Then follows a chapter entitled “The Interview,” an inquisitory conversation with Chillingworth. Chapter Five, “Hester at her Needle,” is a fairly panoramic survey of an extended period of Hester’s life after she is released from prison, but the emphasis is on her interior life—on her sense of herself.

Chapters Six through Eight focus on Pearl. The first of these speculates on the mystery of Pearl’s inner self, on Hester’s bafflement before her daughter’s “strange remoteness and intangibility.” The chapter concludes with a harrowing inquisition:

“Thou strange and elfish child, whence did’st thou come?”

“Tell me! Tell me!” repeated Pearl. . . . “It is thou that must tell me.”

The next two chapters place Pearl in the public setting of the Governor’s Hall and have as their climax another inquisitorial passage, though on the level of official state business: the civil and religious authorities examine Pearl in Christian Doctrine.

Chillingworth is the center of the next segment of the novel; as with the characters before him he is observed from three angles of vision, though less elaborately. “The Leech,” Chapter Nine, emphasizes the division between his professional identity (“Roger Chillingworth was a brilliant acquisition”) and his concealed inner self (“he chose to withdraw his name from the rolls of mankind”), but finally concentrates on his inquisitorial relation with Dimmesdale. (Ironically the character who is the most fully concealed is the novel’s principal advocate of openness.)

Chapter Ten, “The Leech and his Patient,” acts as a transition from Chillingworth to Dimmesdale; it represents the two in a personal relationship that Hawthorne calls “a kind of intimacy.” Dimmesdale thereupon is viewed privately in “The Interior of a Heart” and publicly in “The Minister’s Vigil,” in which he takes his place on the scaffold at night, in an empty observance of the ceremony of self-exposure before the community.

This is appropriately the precise middle of the novel; the full set of character relationships has been established. In the first half we have observed each of the four principal characters from the same three perspectives. What is most important, I believe, is the consistency with which intimacy and

openness are frustrated. Obviously the public stances of the four have at best a limited correspondence to their interior selves; most often they are gross distortions. Dimmesdale as the "Minister" and Chillingworth as the "Physician," though victim and villain, are alike disguised by the masks of official position. Even Hester, in her eventual office of "Sister of Mercy," is granted an almost formal public role. The three figures who are "official" benefactors of society are estranged from it. Furthermore Hester and Pearl are obliterated as persons by being formally converted into allegorical emblems of sin and its effects. It should be noted that virtually every official act of the Puritan community has the effect of frustrating intimacy. Punishment isolates in an especially diabolical way: Hester is not only publicly humiliated, but both imprisoned and exiled (that her crime was intimacy with another human being is almost too fitting). Further, when the community rewards, by conferring titles and honors, it saves itself the trouble of knowing those thus distinguished as individuals. Chillingworth fits in ideally with his totally professional role, and Dimmesdale finds his ministerial distinction a grimly ironic obstacle to confession.

The various "interviews" are perversions of intimacy; they have the form but not the content of honest dialogue. When characters seek out the confidence of others, one or both conceals his inner self, or, worse, uses the form of friendship for malicious destruction (Chillingworth "burrowed into the clergyman's intimacy"). The novel presents an extensive number of relationships established on a deliberately false basis: Pearl and Dimmesdale, Hester and Dimmesdale, Hester and Chillingworth, Chillingworth and Dimmesdale, Pearl and Hester, Hester and the community, Chillingworth and the community, and Dimmesdale and the community.

Similarly, when we are allowed to view the characters in themselves we note varying kinds of self-deception, failures at honest introspection. For Hawthorne, of course, there is guilt in the soul of everyone, if not for what one has done, then for what one desires; Hester may be exposed as a sinner before the community, but there are deep feelings that she conceals from herself. She fails to acknowledge fully to herself that which Hawthorne suggests is her real reason for remaining in the place of her ignominy, a desire to have Dimmesdale share with her "a joint futurity of endless retribution" and "make that their marriage altar." But Hester "hid the secret from herself. . . . She barely looked the idea in the face." Instead she allows herself to believe the more acceptable explanation that "her daily shame would at last purge her soul."

Though we see Pearl almost entirely from the outside, we yet gain the impression of a radical incompleteness in her inner being. In almost a literal sense she is inhuman, as a result of alienation, "fatherlessness," and the symbolic role assigned to her. As is often the case in Hawthorne's works, isolation from society engenders some grave distortion of perception and,



beyond that, a self-hatred. Hawthorne speculates that Pearl is a kind of solipsist, living in a private world of fantasy and despising her own visions.

Chillingworth also seems a solipsist, "a man chiefly accustomed to look inward, and to whom external matters are of very little value and import, unless they bear relation to something within his mind." But if Pearl has yet to become fully human, Chillingworth has virtually obliterated his own soul (his conversations with Hester suggest that he once had one). Hence his inwardness is nothing like the terrible self-awareness of Dimmesdale, rather it is an absorption in a malignant obsession. In Chillingworth we find nothing like conflict or doubt; and he seems to have no interest in grappling with his motive for torturing Dimmesdale: whether it be revenge, malice, or scientific curiosity. Only once does Chillingworth really perceive his own horror, after Hester condemns him for what he has done to Dimmesdale. Chillingworth admits that he, "a mortal man, with once a human heart, has become a fiend for [Dimmesdale's] especial torment!" To Hawthorne the utterance, accompanied by "a look of horror," indicates that "It was one of those moments . . . when a man's moral aspect is faithfully revealed to his mind's eye. Not improbably, he had never before viewed himself as he did now."

Finally, Dimmesdale seems to have the fullest "interior world." As with Hawthorne in "The Custom House," only the inner self is finally real to him. "The only truth that continued to give Mr. Dimmesdale a real existence on this earth was the anguish in his inmost soul. . . ." He constantly turns to self-communion, but the only effect is to strengthen his self-hatred: "by the constitution of his nature, he loved the truth, as few men ever did. Therefore, above all things else, he loathed his miserable self!"

The second half of the novel develops from Hester's conversion, her newly discovered "freedom of speculation," which Hawthorne suggests is a result of an imposed solitude: "her life had turned, in a great measure, from passion and feeling, to thought." At first she urges Chillingworth to release her from her bond of secrecy; but when she fails, she nonetheless reveals his identity as her husband to Dimmesdale; finally she even persuades Dimmesdale to leave New England with herself and Pearl. Through these episodes, especially in the extensive forest scene, Pearl's inquisitory demands for the truth insistently challenge and ultimately defeat Hester's demands for freedom. There is a kind of relief when Hester and Dimmesdale for the first time in the novel are allowed a private discourse; intimacy seems at last achieved. But through Pearl, Hawthorne reasserts his strenuous demand that a personal openness must be barren as long as one is shielded from the world.

In the forest scene, the point of view turns again to Dimmesdale. His final crisis, it should be noted, takes him from a personal relation (with Hester and Pearl), to the community (the town figures he encounters on



his frenzied return from the woods), to his private self ("The Minister in a Maze"), to the full community, assembled in ritual formality ("The New England Holiday"), and, climactically, to the three realms simultaneously, as he publicly embraces his child and his lover, and can at last be at peace with himself. Hawthorne stresses these abrupt transitions from one human environment to another. Quite different kinds of communication are involved when Dimmesdale converses with Hester, when he communes with himself, when he advances through the crowd to the church and delivers his Election sermon. Each involvement contradicts the others. Only after he leaves Hester and Pearl does his life, especially the just-concluded meeting, seem a "dream." His public performance seems an unconscious act, a sublimation of both passion for Hester and anxiety for guilt; it is also a public rejection of Hester and Pearl. Hester is dismayed by his remoteness: "One glance of recognition, she had imagined, needs pass between them. She thought of the dim forest . . . where sitting hand in hand they had mingled their sad and passionate talk with the melancholy murmur of the brook. How deeply had they known each other then! And was this the man? She hardly knew him now."

Dimmesdale's final position, his public revelation not just of sin but of love, seems to be the attainment of an ideal for Hawthorne—the achievement of honest relations on three levels of his personal existence. That it is also the moment of his death grimly underlines the agonies involved in achieving the ideal, or perhaps the impossibility of achieving it on earth. It is because Hawthorne's characters belong to three conflicting worlds that they achieve fulfillment in none of these.

Finally, more attention must be given to the uncommon stress the novel gives to the importance of openness before the community at large. The state festival which provides the occasion for the conclusion is not merely a dramatic backdrop for the climax. In the parallel public occasion with which the novel begins, we observe ritual and institutionalized cruelty and repression. Yet the Election Day ceremony is—so far as Puritans can manage it—joyous. Moreover the occasion looks forward to future blessings rather than to past sins. In his sermon Dimmesdale's "mission [is] to foretell a high and glorious destiny for the newly gathered people of the Lord." Hawthorne is quick to observe that "through the whole discourse, there had been a certain deep, sad note of pathos," but the affirmation of the goodness of the state is not totally dimmed. Further, Dimmesdale's avowal of the progress of the community contrasts instructively with Hester's recent proposal that she, Dimmesdale, and Pearl seek a purely private fulfillment, moving to Europe where they will live anonymously and thus be members of no community (the plan actually carried out in America by Chillingworth).

To Hawthorne any such equivalent of "light[ing] out for the Territory"

is an unsatisfactory solution to the problem of social oppression. Hawthorne is less like Thoreau and Twain, and more like James and the Melville of *Billy Budd* in requiring (if never achieving) an accommodation with the social order on the part of his freedom-seeking characters. As Lawrence Sargent Hall's *Hawthorne: Critic of Society* (Gloucester, Mass., 1966) suggests, Hawthorne is uncommonly absorbed in political problems, and his biography manifests his active participation in Democratic Party politics. His novels and tales deal extensively with political structures, social transformation, and civic participation. For example, Robin Molineux's "night journey" is an exposure of a political community and the nature of public power.

To return to "The Custom House," we should note that Hawthorne begins his volume with a discourse on his own participation in government, indeed on his removal from an unsatisfactory political appointment as a result of his party's defeat at the polls. One inevitably compares the lifeless paternalism of the "Uncle Sam" who provides a meaningless parasitical livelihood for the custom house officials to the stern, yet vigorous, theocratic state that both punishes Hester Prynne and raises a triumphant shout following the Election Day sermon of Arthur Dimmesdale. The glorious era that the minister forecast never came into being, but Hawthorne never questions that which is so emphatic in the novel's preface, its beginning, and its end: one's deepest personal life depends on the possibility of establishing an open relationship with the organized community.